

THE PARAPOETICS OF VIDEO

We have heard of the poetics of music (e.g., Stravinsky) and the poetics of film (e.g., Brakhage). We have even heard of the poetics of video, although no single theoretical position has developed far enough that we immediately think of a name to attach to it. Long before any of these we heard of the poetics of poetry and drama, and until somewhere around the beginning of the 19th century it was reasonable to assume that a coherent poetics might be stated for the better part of the "genuine" poetry being written. After William Blake and S.T. Coleridge that assumption came permanently into doubt. After Pound, Gertrude Stein, Joyce, Futurism, Dada, Surrealism, etc. it became manifestly obvious that a plurality of poetic systems was now the norm, and that a significant portion of the interesting new work in the verbal arts would develop innovative compositional methods and lay bare new poetic principles. By the early 50s the plurality of poetic positions had led to the use of systematic chance operations in the work of John Cage and Jackson Mac Low, the "projective verse" and "composition by field" in Charles Olson and Robert Duncan, the further union of the graphic and the lexical in the "concrete poetry" of many European and American poets, and so on. The ongoing succession of altered poetic practices has created a now traditional challenge to the assumption that one can articulate a comprehensive poetics -- or even that we would know one if we saw one.

So if we wish to speak of the poetics of video we have two problems: to define a new art form and to state the principles (the poetics) that make the definitions applicable. For many reasons (some of them famous) video suffers from drawing its poetics from other art forms, although in varying degrees this has proved unavoidable -- and certainly all of the results are not detrimental. To attempt to solve the problem by turning to poetics, as derived from literary studies, is to deepen the obscurations (such as have long beset literary criticism). Video, beginning as it does in the pluralistic '60s, is almost instantly the inheritor of the full range of "aesthetic tendencies" in several art forms -- film, painting, graphics, photography, music, performance, installation art, theater, fiction, poetry There's at least one of everything showing up in video. But most important, there are a lot of things showing up in video and nowhere else. These things constitute, in part, what might be called "essential video"-- the range of endangered qualities in current critical discourse.

It may well be that video enters the world at the stage that poetics (as in "poetry") had already reached somewhat earlier, wherein the real critical/theoretical breakthroughs are emerging inside the work of the artist (echoed only faintly in the work of critics) and that the most articulate manifestations outside the work take place in dialogue among the artists themselves and between them and their reader/viewers. Indeed the latter's presence in the dialogue constitutes active participation and even direct reflexive influence on the development of the "poetics-field." The poetics is itself undergoing rapid transformation, and the circumambient dialogue is a sort of encircling pool of conceptual resources, any moment of which that can be isolated is like a snapshot of the mardi gras-- an isolated view of the masks we wear, a brief revelation, the dynamic rather than the overview. There is potential value in assembling these views or "slides" side by side, if for no other reason than to sharpen our perception and enhance the active vocabulary. But the process of the work cannot be captured by this method. Furthermore, to avoid the quagmire of fossilized and fossilizing "authoritative" criticism, a basic principle must be kept within hearing: that

each new conceptual stance or move within an underlying poetics, each thrust of theorizing intelligence, is mind-degradable (as in biodegradable), and is subject to rapid recomposting. Without recomposting, recomposition and new composition become self-imitating and remain at the effect of established critical values. To support the further exercising of the inherent powers of video, the work must be kept in free space, open to its own special opportunities for the particular artist.

In a certain sense each new work speaks its own poetics, its own working principles. How to have a view of the "field" without losing the specificity of the particular work? How to predispose oneself to openness without loss of exact and discriminate attention to individual work? Video faces the problematic of any radically new step in art, that the discourse available at the time of its appearance is referential to the past. The discourse is a "frame" and implies a "frame of mind." To alter the one must alter the other. The motivation of change lies in the art work itself, and one turns to the work as source. It should be the function of criticism to discover a poetics in direct relation to the work. So the question we are asking is really a practical one of how to dispose the mind in such a way that it can be "radicalized" by new work. I believe the answer lies partly in altering the frame of discourse by conscious modification of the conceptual base. One strategy is to avoid seeking a poetics in general, and to look instead for the poetics-in-process of particular works. Rather than thinking of a generalizing poetics, one can think from a disposition to openness, a "metapoetics," or as I prefer to name it, a parapoetics. As principle, parapoetics stands for the attention to successive transformations, rather than the formulation of reliable abstractions or generally applicable coherent truths. Such attention seeks opportunities to participate in the synapse that is the actual energy of the experienced work. The parapoetic modality is less intent upon identifying the pattern or idea than it is inhabiting it. What pattern or idea it lays out has the validity of the road map, measurable in terms of serviceability. The critic as explorer replaces the critic as real estate agent touting his favorite resort for the quick sale.

Let's assume that video art is circumferential to any available discourse about it; that is, it cannot be contained in any perception/conception embodied in a description, and its active periphery stands outside any theoretical/aesthetic stance (even if the latter preceded or created it).

And let's assume, more basically, that there is something called "video" (whatever it is) that stands in relation to video art as language (whatever it is) stands to poetry. To learn what poetry is we ought not look to, say, Chomsky and his research into normative speech; rather we should carry what we know of speech (from the full range of our sources, including our own experience as speakers, as well as Chomsky's or Sausurre's or Heidegger's abstractions) to the direct experience of extraordinary language that is poetry. The emphasis is on the ongoing discrimination of key factors active within any work and on the waves it is making in the minds of its viewers. The event is in the artist/viewer's dialogue with the medium-as-inhabited, as "possessed" by art-energy. Its radically individual imprint on the mind-field can receive full participation only in a context of generosity and openness, a context protected, however invisibly, by the parapoetic principle in which continuous transformation is the only given.

How to cut through the accumulated overlays of art criticism? The answer lies in the development of conscious strategies toward a programmatic openness.

These strategies include examining existing critical modes for their structural, rather than contentual, value. And they include, for instance, intensifying the dialogue among participants and learning to listen to that dialogue -- to hear the artists and their works more intently and particularly, to hear the events of one's own responsive consciousness more minutely. And to weave the new data and the process of its discovery more subtly within one's own discourse. Criticism might become, in large part, a finely tuned performance of conversation overheard -- between the artist and the medium, between different artists, between artist and viewer, and between viewer and medium.

Dialogics serves parapoetics, which in turn reveals the increment of change by which the artistic process is creating new values. A new approach to recording these values is a new discourse for art history.